

A conversation with RPM founder - Walt Grealis

This is the text of an interview with RPM Magazine founder and publisher Walt Grealis on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of RPM. Dale Kotyk's interview appeared in the March 13th, 1989 issue of RPM. It's as rare and intimate glimpse of "The Godfather of Cancon" who set out 25 years before to create a Canadian star system for recording artists and a momentum that would spread to every aspect of Canada's culture.

Dale Kotyk: We can start right at the beginning.

Walt Grealis: 146 Strachan Avenue ... not too far from the Prince's Gates of the CNE, that's where I was born.

DK: Well, not quite that far back, but go ahead pursue that.

WG: The year was 1929; Wall Street had laid an egg. My dad was a Toronto firefighter, Irish and Spanish. The name is Spanish. My mother was Canadian, actually descended from the Cree. I went to Central Commerce in Toronto. Joined the RCMP in 1947 when I was eighteen and came back to Toronto in 1952 as a member of the Toronto Police Department.



Walt in 1952 as a Toronto policeman.

Left Toronto, again, five years later, to work in Bermuda at the St. Georges Hotel as Sports Director and Social Host. Returned to Toronto a year later and joined the O'Keefe Brewing Company in sales and promotion, moving to Labatt's five years later and in 1960 I joined Apex Records, Ontario distributor for Compo, now MCA. George Offer hired me to do promotion. Three years later Max Zimmerman, who headed up MacKay Records, Ontario distributor for London Records, took me on as Promotion Manager. I kept that job until February of 1964, when I started RPM. The rest is history.

DK: But just the kind of history we want to get into. What moved you to take the risk of starting a magazine? Did you know anything about writing or publishing?

WG: I knew nothing about publishing at all, and the only writing I had done was police reports. As for the risk, who thinks of these things when you're young? I thought I could conquer the world. It was hit and miss ... actually a comedy of errors.

DK: Where did the inspiration come from to start a magazine?

WG: Now that I think of it, the need was apparent

everywhere. Here we were in this giant country and all the recording artists were going down to the U.S. to cut a record. They brought their records back home and a record company literally threw it out to the market. Some were mailed to radio stations and everybody sat back and waited. Usually nothing happened. A few artists had gone to the U.S. with demos and signed with foreign companies. Once in a while a fluke would happen and a Canadian act would come up with a hit.

DK: So there were hits before RPM?

WG: Yes. Priscilla Wright, Bobby Curtola, the Beaumarks, Crew Cuts, The Diamonds, Paul Anka, Percy Faith, Wilf Carter, Hank Snow, The Four Lads and a few more who had to go south to be recognized. There were stars even before this and there was a great deal of country and French-language recording being done in Canada. For any trivia buffs, I bet they don't know who Joseph Saucier was. Now, that was Cancon!

DK: What year would that have been?

WG: 1903. I was just listening to his record the other day.

DK: You're kidding?

WG: No I'm not. I actually did listen to it last Monday. He was a baritone and his wife accompanied him on the piano. That was 1903. I was born 26 years later.

DK: So you felt the need for a magazine on recording?

WG: Yes. It was 1964 and one of the things I remember was a lunch at the Celebrity Club on Jarvis Street and Harold Moon, of BMI Canada (now PROCAN), was explaining the problems of the industry and he mentioned the need for something that would spread the news from east to west ... because so much of what we knew about records came from the south ... the U.S.A.

DK: What were the great influences on Canadian music in those days?

WG: The Gavin Report, Cashbox and Billboard.

DK: There were no Canadian magazines dealing with records?

WG: Worse than that, there was very little in the dailies about records and next to nothing about Canadian records. It just wasn't considered important at that time.

DK: The first RPM was a single sheet folded in half?

WG: No ... it was a legal sized sheet with typing on one side and, I think, it was like that for about a dozen issues. I'd like to show you a copy, but we mailed them all out and they've all vanished. We've been trying to get a copy of the first three issues for 25 years, just to see what it looked like and what I wrote. We got up to three pages and THEN went to a very dwarfed type and a single sheet folded in half. It was a tip sheet to radio and to the record companies, and it cost \$10 per quarter to subscribe. How about that!



Dale Kotyk talks to Walt Grealis.



An early love affair in South America.



Walt and Sir Ernest MacMillan, Toronto Symphony Orchestra conductor.

DK: When did the first glossy RPM come out?

WG: September 1st, 1964 ... six months after the birth of RPM. It was eight pages, and, for the first time, we took advertising. That issue was packed with ads. So I thought it would be smooth sailing from then on. The industry, however, gave us six weeks ... then six months ... then a year and then they stopped guessing.

DK: Did it get easier then?

WG: Hell no! It got really tough, and, for five years, it did better than break even, and about 1969 it started to get better and by 1970 it started to look really good.

DK: But did the magazine Increase Interest In Canadian recordings?

WG: It was the best thing that ever happened to the industry. Radio stations were finally finding out in Halifax what was happening in Vancouver, and in between. RPM began to bring the industry together, but it was very slow going and it was a major chore to convince record companies to advertise on a weekly basis when they never had to advertise, at all, up until that time. There were few record people who knew how to put together an ad ... and to do it once a week, well ... forget it!

DK: RPM showed no profit for five years?

WG: It did better than break even for the first five years. As a matter of fact, a lawyer friend of mine got me to go see a business consultant and after I told him everything he needed to know about the financial affairs of RPM, he told me to forget it ... the magazine had no future ... and I was wasting my time. I wonder where he is now. Not only did RPM become a mammoth success, but it figured significantly in the history of the Canadian recording industry.

DK: If a business consultant told you to pull the plug, why did you continue?

WG: I just believed I should keep doing it 'til I needed glasses. It was still working and all the bills were paid and there was money in the bank, so naturally, I thought it could work out ... and it did!

DK: The Junos started right off the bat as a music poll in RPM?

WG: Yes, it did. I felt the readers should get involved and we published a ballot in the magazine and asked our readers to name their favourite Cancon artists. There was quite a response, and all we did was publish the results. We didn't give them anything ... just the recognition! Every year, the winners were published on the front page of RPM, and it wasn't until February 1970 when we presented physical awards. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

DK: What were some of the high points of those first five years?

WG: Really ... there weren't any. We reported each week and Canadian artists slowly began to record in Canada and some Canadian records were released in the U.S. We were hopelessly behind with facilities in Canada. Most of the recording sessions, in those days, were done on primitive three-track facilities at a handful of studios. There were no four-track studios in Canada until 1966 and even then ... they were four-track in name only. Mastering in Canada was near to impossible ... and yet, the sound the producers, at that time, were getting out of those studios, was quite amazing. Art Snider was putting out records by the Allan Sisters; Duff Roman was recording David Clayton Thomas and the Paupers. Sandy Gardiner was recording the Esquires and Bob Burns was working with the Guess Who. It was a very

exciting time. The RPM Starline Photo Album, which was published in 1967, was filled with Canadian recording artists, many of whom did record in Canada. We just kept talking about the business as if it was a giant industry, and it began to catch on. We treated every recording act like big stars. We made them look important and the industry started to believe it mattered. We were starting to build a star system in Canada. In the late sixties a number of factions had been bugging the CRTC for Canadian content on radio.

DK: It sounded like hard work ... like you had a fight on your hands!

WG: It was hard work, but we enjoyed it because we were doing a number of other things as well. We were bringing the industry together. We introduced something of a social aspect to industry activities. We began to throw conferences and parties and we introduced the RPM Gold Leaf Awards, signifying records that had experienced outstanding sales in Canada. We published a Canadian Music Industry Directory, a couple of Who's Who annuals, and a guide to recording studios. It's interesting to remember that back in those days lawyers wrote on the law of the music business when very few, if any, knew or cared about the music business. We set out to create a genuine music industry and attempted to rid ourselves of the stigma that Canada was a country being controlled by foreign branch offices.



RPM mascot Irving was there when it all began.

DK: What were the high points of the 25 years of RPM?

WG: I guess Pierre Juneau, showing up at the early Juno Awards ... alone, walking down a long hallway with his ticket in his hand. That was the first time I met him. Anne Murray, getting out of her sick bed to come to the Junos ... in her bare feet. I told her she could catch a cold walking around like that. Marci MacDonald writing in the Toronto Star about the Junos. RPM's part in the invasion of MIDEM. Just look at it now. Walt Grealis Day in Ottawa ... that was nice. Actually catching a glimpse of Trudeau at the Junos in 1979. I was seated at the back of the room and he passed within ten feet of me and went to the front to sit with all the CARAS heavies. I have yet to meet him. I would have liked to. The other things are private. They are little things that just pleased me and really wouldn't be of interest to the readers.

DK: Name a few ... give us an idea of what makes you tick!

WG: Flying by private jet to a junket; flying Concorde to MIDEM ... and back. I have my pilot's ticket, you know. Skydiving, jogging ... yah ... the places I've jogged, all over the world ... like Hyde Park in London, the Croisette in Cannes, Disney World, Champs Elysees in Paris, Acapulco, Tangiers, Casablanca, Venezuela, Malaga, Madeira and the Seawall in Stanley Park.



Ottawa's Esquires accepting the pre-Juno RPM Gold Leaf Award for group 1964.



Walt with The Sugar Shoppe. On the right is group member Victor Garber who went on to a successful career in television and film, starring as the main role Jesus in Godspell (1973).

DK: But, what would be your favourite place?

WG: Wilket Creek Park, which is just down the road from our building on Brentcliffe, in Toronto's prestigious graphics arts district, right next to the Inn on the Park. No matter where you go in the world, there's no place like Canada. You have to travel the world to realize how lucky we are.

DK: What about the private, behind-the-scenes life of the founder of RPM?

WG: I live alone, in a house on a forty foot bluff overlooking Lake Ontario and a stone's throw from Camp X ... if you're familiar with the Man From Intrepid book ... that's in Whitby. I also maintain quarters in Toronto, so as not to commute every day. I own three motorcycles ... a Harley, a Honda and a prize 1970 BSA, which is a collector's bike. I have a Sunfish, which is a small sports sailboat ... and I wish I could find the time to use it more. I jog about five miles a day, average, and belong to three health clubs. I do a bit of lifting.



Very young high school friends Walt Grealis and Stan Klees co-founders of RPM and the Juno Awards and pioneers of the Cancon momentum.

DK: Pet peeves. What bothers you?

WG: The entertainment/classified sections of Canada's dailies. I think the sports sections are better. Wine and cheese parties. Invitations that are badly worded and don't tell you what you're invited to. Invitations and tickets that come in the door on the day of the event, as if you don't have anything else to do that day.

DK: What makes you happy?

WG: Working at the job I have. We're so lucky to be in this business because it has all the glamour of show business ... without the hassles of television, movies and the other areas of showbiz. We are treated really well everywhere we go ... or at least ... I am, and I make a living doing what others do when they go out to have a good time. That's why I never like to complain. Just think of other people who have real jobs and have to work really hard. I love the record business and the people in it. Some of them make it really hard to like them, but ... what the hell!

DK: Tell me about Elvira Caprese!

WG: Actually the character goes back to the early days of RPM when I did nearly all of the writing myself and I invented names for various people who wrote columns in RPM, like Bebe Gee, E.J.E.I.O. MacDonald, Penelope Penelope, Canada Bill, and Elvira Caprese and so on. Back in those days, she wrote her own column and I'm talking about twenty-four and a half years ago. Now, she

makes little comments in Walt Says, my gossip column. She says things that I wouldn't dare say in print. Funny-lady ... nasty lady, but she really is a good friend.

DK: Do you realize how widely read Walt Says Is?

WG: You bet I do. I get phone calls, letters and, sometimes, threats. As a matter of fact, I've been asked to write a gossip column and I guess it would be interesting, but not while I have RPM to look after.

DK: Someone told me that at the 25th Anniversary tribute to RPM, you may announce your retirement. Is that true?

WG: Never. RPM has never been so successful. We seem to have caught the imagination of radio stations, record stores and the industry ... and I've never felt so positive about RPM. No ... there are still a lot of things to do and we continue to document the history of the Canadian music industry. There are things we do that no one else in the industry can do. We have the experience of all those years ... the intuition and the feeling of what is going on in the industry. We don't print sheets and sheets of tracking information to prove what is happening. We are researchers, and most programmers just look at RPM, find what they want and get back to business. Tracking is very important to the business, but we are a quick read for the busy professional who wants to keep abreast. It was a very sharp industry "heavy", who once said, "85 percent of the records sold in Canada are listed each week in the pages of RPM." I think he may have been very close, and if the bottom line is ... the bottom line, then that is the most important information you need. But if the bottom line is politics ... look elsewhere.

DK: What's in the future for RPM?

WG: In a very short time we'll have to concern ourselves with some kind of video disc. Right now, we're on the brink of sell-through music videos and any day now, the record companies are going to get interested. The breakthrough is so recent that many of the record companies are just starting to get interested. RPM is very interested, but the record companies are still waiting to see. Canadian country music needs to clean house and get back on the tracks. A few years ago they set themselves back a decade, but I think they may be able to get rid of the gloss, the glamour and get back to making records. A TV special once a year is not the answer.

DK: Thank you for being so candid, and is there something you'd like to say.

WG: I get the chance to say anything I want, every week of the year. That's a privilege I cherish and would never abuse. I'm pleased that we are celebrating our 25th Anniversary and particularly the way it's being done ... that it's all being done for charity and in particular, the Variety Club, which is the favoured charity of the record industry ... that the real benefit will go to needy kids and that the whole thing was arranged tastefully by the committee, CARAS and the Variety Club. It will be great to sit in that particular ballroom at the Inn on the Park and be with so many of the friends I've gotten to know over the past twenty-five years. What a legacy we leave behind. This little magazine has accomplished so much in all those years. No one can be more thrilled or amazed than me ... that we were able to do it. There are still a few things that have to be done ... and a few innovations we can come up with. It's not over 'til the fat lady sings!



Anne Murray got out of her sick bed to come to the 1971 Junos ... in her bare feet.



Walt talks to Canadian legend Gordon Lightfoot.



Randy Bachman presents Walt with a People's Award from Canadian musicians inscribed "You've always been there when we needed you" - 1975.